

Catherine Snow: Building Language Knowledge

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Announcer 3: Welcome to the National Center on Early Childhood Development, Teaching and Learning podcast series, which focuses on the Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework. In this podcast, you will hear from Catherine Snow about the language and literacy domain of the Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework. We hope you enjoy this broadcast.

Announcer 2: From the ELOF — "Communication is fundamental to the human experience, and language and literacy are essential to children's learning.

Jan Greenberg: Catherine, I am delighted to be sitting here with you and having a conversation about the Head Start Early Learning Outcome Framework, or ELOF, as it relates to the language and literacy domain. And so, to get started, I'd like you to introduce yourself and tell us a little bit about your background and current involvement in work around language and literacy for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers.

Catherine Snow: I am Catherine Snow. I'm on the faculty at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. My career started, actually, with an interest in language development, learn how adults talk to children and whether that did have any relationship to children's language acquisition. I've also done a fair amount of work on bilingual development, second-language learning, in young children, as well as older children, and the relationship between oral-language skills on the part of children and their literacy development. So, one of the things that we know, very generally, about successful literacy learners is that they are typically also successful users of oral language, that children with large vocabularies, children with more developed narrative skills, with better grammar, are likely to have no trouble learning how to read.

Jan: Talk to us about any important findings from current research that would help our understanding of what children should know and do in the area of language and literacy — thinking about infants, toddlers, and preschool children.

Catherine: There's been a huge amount of focus in recent years on the so-called vocabulary gap, the 30 million-word gap, the much greater exposure to language that children in some high-resourced families have and that children in less-resourced families don't have. I think, personally, that that is a misrepresentation of the issue or the problem. I don't like to think about a 30 million-word gap. I'd like to think about a very large knowledge gap, because it's not

really that we should be teaching kids words. And it's understandable, if we focus in our communications to practitioners on the 30 million-word gap, that they then move into a, "Oh, teach vocabulary, teach vocabulary!" kind of response, which is, frankly, a mistake. Parents whose kids are learning language normally are not thinking about teaching vocabulary. They're thinking about communication. They're thinking about answering children's questions, reading books with them, having conversations with them, explaining things to them.

Jan: That's a really, really good point. Are there other important guiding principles or concepts that they should keep in mind in thinking about supporting children's language and literacy development across that spectrum and progression?

Catherine: Well, another very basic principle is that kids are more likely to learn language and content in the process of talking about things they are interested in. The 3-year-old boy who loves dinosaurs is likely to accumulate knowledge and language very rapidly if given the opportunity to go to the library and take out 25 dinosaur books and have those read to him and develop that as a domain of expertise, and is much less likely to develop strong language skills or build up a complex representation of a conceptual domain if he's only given books about ponies, right? So, I think acknowledging that many children have domains of real interest and curiosity and responding to those domains, which, of course, is something that parents can do more easily than providers in group settings. But providers in group settings can do it to some extent, too, by individualizing their classroom libraries to the interests of kids, by developing discussion groups around these topics that two or three of the children might be interested in.

Jan: Any guiding principles or concepts around the literacy parts, around books, and about beginning mark-making that they could be keeping in mind?

Catherine: Sure. Children, of course, are interested in communicating in writing as much as they're interested in communicating orally, and they often engage in emergent spelling or — or using drawings or self-invented symbols to represent what they want to write. And that's all absolutely normal and worth promoting, worth supporting. I think it's, of course, fun for a lot of kids to learn the conventional alphabet. It's not fun for all kids to learn the conventional alphabet. I personally am not too worried if 3-year-olds don't know the alphabet. They are almost certain to learn it by the time they get to kindergarten. And it isn't, after all, that huge a task — 26 letters, two forms per letter, perhaps. Kids can manage that in a relatively short period of time, once it becomes important to them to do it. And trying to teach kids something they're not interested in — which is another way of saying not ready to learn — it could divert time that might be much better spent responding to whatever it is they are interested in learning, like getting those books about dinosaurs read, for example. I think one of the big challenges of having early childhood and through primary education is allocating the time invested in particular topics or domains of learning to the size of the task. If you think about letter knowledge -- small task. Doesn't require huge amounts of time. Think about phonological awareness. Again, it's a relatively small task. If you start with 5-year-olds and give them 20 minutes a day for 6 weeks, they've got it, right? You don't need to start this at age 3. You don't need to keep it going through third grade. But the big tasks are the knowledge-

building tasks and building the language that helps children represent, access, and remember that knowledge. Those are the tasks that we need to be spending a lot more time on.

Jan: We hope you've enjoyed this podcast featuring Catherine Snow on how the Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework applies to literacy development in young children. Have a great day.

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